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The beauty of Bhutan

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Published in:
Courier Mail, Brisbane

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Recommended citation(APA):
Grenby, M. (2006). The beauty of Bhutan. *Courier Mail, Brisbane.*

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NO ordinary place ... Bhutan has a Gross National Happiness Index.

The beauty of Bhutan

Spectacular scenery heads the long list of highlights for visitors to this Himalayan kingdom, writes **Mike Grenby**

AFTER passing Mt Everest on the left, the Druk Air Airbus 319 weaves its way down a narrow mountain valley to land at Paro.

The few foreigners on board have little idea of what lies ahead, such as the legacy of a 15th-century mad monk named Lama Drukpa Kuenley, whose phallus is symbolised very graphically on buildings to ward off evil spirits; a chain of luxurious yet local resorts surrounded by spectacular scenery; muffins with chilli, marijuana growing along the road being gathered as pig feed, countless stray dogs, itinerant road menders breaking stones along the one-lane highways, cliff-hugging monasteries, fortresses, a benevolent king who plans to abdicate in favour of democracy and the Gross National Happiness Index.

Welcome to Bhutan.

Tucked between Tibet and India, Bhutan has a population of about 690,000. Some two-thirds are subsistence farmers, 80 per cent live at least an hour's walk from a road and about half live more than a day's walk from a road.

Bhutan opened its doors to tourists in 1974 and although the annual limit of 2000 has been lifted, most Westerners consider it a new, exotic destination. Bhutan is trying to avoid the uncontrolled tourism that brought

undesirable influences to Nepal, a few Himalayan mountain ranges away.

So far, the strategy seems to be working. Visitors pay upwards of \$US200 a day, which includes all accommodation and meals, taxes and entry fees, a guide and driver. That tends to keep out backpackers but is quite reasonable by international travel standards.

Bhutan is not an ordinary place, said the award-winning writer Stan Armington, whose *Lonely Planet Bhutan* guide should be required reading for anybody planning to visit.

The country has one foot in the past and one in the future.

The past, set in spectacular scenery (elevation ranges from 100m in the south to peaks topping 7000m in the north) with the prayer wheels, prayer flags and philosophy of the country's Buddhist religion, is what attracts most visitors.

At Punakha, an almost sub-tropical area that makes you feel you are back in Queensland with bananas, bougainvillea, jacaranda and prickly pear cactus, you walk half an hour through two small villages and fields and along irrigation channels to the Chimi Lhakhang monastery, built by Lama Drukpa Kuenley (1455-1529), the "mad monk" or "divine madman".

He gained notoriety through his outrageous, obscene, sexual, humor-

Getting there

Allow plenty of planning time, especially if you want to visit in the peak September-October (autumn) festival period. Government-controlled Bhutan tourism is still in its infancy and the bureaucratic wheels move slowly. Take earplugs, as the dogs in Bhutan often bark and howl at night; the Amankora resorts are quiet because they are far enough out of the centre of town. I did pop ginger pills in case of motion sickness on the winding roads and had no problems. Altitude sickness affects some people.

Take clothing layers: depending on the time of year, temperatures can range from -6C to 34C.

Keep your bank receipt when you change money so you can change back when you leave the country: the nu, the local currency, is worthless outside Bhutan.

ous, insulting behaviour — provoking people to discard their preconceptions about life and religion.

Childless women go to the temple to receive a blessing from the sexually active saint, whose phallus adorns many buildings in the area to protect them from evil spirits and/or as a symbol of fertility.

Hotel accommodation also comes in several versions: from basic guesthouses to the luxurious Amankora. Amankora's all-inclusive rates start at about \$1200 a day and if you stay seven days, also include a tailor-made itinerary, private transport with guide and driver and a spa treatment.

I visited the four Amankora properties combined with a tour by Tshering

Dorji, of Bhutan Scenic Tours (www.bhutanscenictours.com.bt).

Dorji took care of all the travel details including my visa and flight — arrangements that must be made by a local travel agent or an organisation such as Amanresorts (toll-free 0011 800 2255 2626).

With up to five staff for every guest and 50sq m timbered rooms, Amankora has a different feel from most hotels.

"For example, while we do not have a formal reception or concierge desk," says general manager John Reed, "members of the lodge family can always be found in the living room or reached by phone."

You notice countless stray dogs,

especially in the towns and villages. They often lie on the roads, along with cows.

Residents navigate the narrow winding roads with skill and, for a country with Asian/Indian influence, surprisingly infrequent horn-honking.

Peasants gather the marijuana that grows everywhere to feed their pigs.

Itinerant workers from India and Nepal live in basic shelters along the roads they repair during the day.

You often see women breaking stones with sledgehammers to provide road material.

The king, 50-year-old Jigme Singye Wangchuck, wants to introduce a constitution and democracy to Bhutan in 2008 — a move which worries many inhabitants who have become used to the benevolent monarchy in place since 1907.

He also introduced the concept of a Gross National Happiness Index to emphasise the importance of quality of life.

You can drive into Bhutan from India. But most visitors fly in on Royal Bhutan's Druk Air, the only carrier, either from New Delhi/Calcutta or, because of better connections for most travellers, from Bangkok.

Economy return trips start from about \$725.

Mike Grenby teaches journalism at Bond University on the Gold Coast.